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THE JOYFUL CELEBRATION OF LIFE
KURT VONNEGUT'S AFFIRMATIVE VISION IN
GALÁPAGOS AND BLUEBEARD

Only *Galápagos* (1982) and *Bluebeard* (1987) among Kurt Vonnegut's novels may be said to celebrate life and escape the "air of defeat" which pervades all the others.¹ Both works investigate important issues: *Galápagos* warns against the ultimate effects of humanity's proclivity for destroying the planet and all life on it, while *Bluebeard* examines the human temptation to trivialize talent and creativity contrasted with the enduring substance and value of art. Both have naive narrators, and while their subjects appear widely separated, the values they espouse are closely related. In *Galápagos* latter day human beings slowly evolve over eons into less destructive and far more lovable, furry, polymorphously perverse, aquatic creatures, thus ensuring their own survival in the far future, along with that of other beings

¹ In all his other novels the heroes experience significant loss, defeat, or death beginning with Paul Proteus in *Player Piano* (1952), who finds himself used then abandoned by the revolution he helped instigate as well as the corporation he served so loyally and so long, and continuing through Eugene Debs Hartke incarcerated hero of *Hocus Pocus* (1990), who leaves a horrendous trail of wounded, dead, and/or emotionally maimed. See Morse "Two Studies" and *Kurt Vonnegut* (74—88) for a discussion of the pervasive "air of defeat" in Vonnegut's novels. Some of the material for this essay appeared earlier in *Kurt Vonnegut* in a different form and within a different context.

and of the very planet itself,² while in *Bluebeard* a lone artist in the near future confronting the murderous destructiveness of modern war compassionately transforms its blasted landscape into an image of human hope.

In *Galápagos* Vonnegut returns for the first time since the phenomenally successful *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) to fantasy's "nonidentical twin, science fiction" (Kroeber 1)—but with significant differences between this 1980s extrapolated comic look at the dubious future of mankind and the earlier novels. Gone is the earlier freneticism of *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), the cataclysmic destruction of *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and the predictability of *Player Piano* (1952). Missing also is the Tralfamadorean or God's eye view of all time found in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and in its place is a sweeping view back to the near future from one million years ahead. Using science fiction and setting the novel a million years in the future, becomes in itself, for Vonnegut "a way of saying God doesn't care what becomes of us, and neither does Nature, so we'd better care. We're all there is to care" ("Serenity," 31).³ This sense of the urgent need to take responsible action *now* leads Leonard Mustazza to argue that:

Ultimately, . . . [*Galápagos*] is not concerned with either the past or the future but the present, is not predictive but cautionary, is not about science or religion but about the way we treat one another here and now. (64)

In science fiction, as Ursula Le Guin maintains, the future is always a metaphor (154).⁴ Vonnegut uses the metaphor of the far future to describe

² The evolution Vonnegut pictures is a slow, steady, truly Darwinian one that takes place over a million years because of a change in the environment. For an extensive discussion of Darwin's work and *Galápagos* see: Mustazza 55—65, especially 55, 58—59, and 62—64.

³ James Gunn among numerous other critics draws a clear distinction between fantasy and science fiction: "Science fiction presents a strangeness the reader did not imagine could exist in his world; fantasy tells the reader that the world is strange beyond his belief" ("The Horror," 137).

⁴ "All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is a metaphor. . . . The future, in fiction, is a metaphor" (Le Guin, n. p. ; 154).

the present, in which humans appear anything but “lovable,” while at the same time intimating that through the right use of thinking and feeling humankind and planet earth could prevent ecocide. As contemporary science fiction Vonnegut maintains his novel “had to be responsible in terms of the theory of evolution, the theory of natural selection. . . [since good science fiction will] make people think intelligently about science and what it can or cannot do. That’s what we must do now” (“Serenity,” 30—1).

This didactic aim, in part, leads Vonnegut to reject the kind of themes and values found in much of the more traditional science fiction. According to the literary historian, James Gunn, most if not all science fiction is rooted in the belief that through thinking human beings can indeed save the planet and the species; that through technology a way will be found out of the current ecological dilemma; that progress is not only possible, but probable through science; and that finally:

The farther into space one travels the less significant become the passions and agonies of man, and the only matter of importance in the long morning of man’s struggle to survive is his survival so that his sons could be seeded among the stars.
(In Bretnor, 199)

Vonnegut says a resounding “No!” to any such unearthly faith in populating future worlds. Beginning with *Player Piano* (1952) and *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and continuing through *Galápagos*—and into the non-science fiction novel, *Bluebeard*—he continually satirizes such absence of values and neglect of the heart necessitated by shifting the fictional focus away from individual responsibility to colonizing unknown worlds. Years ago when asked whether he felt there was such a thing as progress—General Electric, for whom he worked for a number of years used to boast, “Progress Is Our Most Important Product”—or if he thought things were getting better, Vonnegut replied: “I don’t have the feeling [that we are going somewhere].” This theme of the lost or never found sense of direction is present in all of Vonnegut’s work including his future fiction which helps

account for the distopia in *Galápagos*, *Slapstick* (1976), *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Player Piano*.

As a novelist, Vonnegut has become increasingly worried about humans destroying the natural world and of the widespread ignorance of nature which encourages such destruction. When faced with a choice between, say, comfort and machine entertainment or some discomfort and an encounter with nature, most characters in his fiction like most of the earth's inhabitants will choose comfort and the machine (see in addition to *Galápagos*, for example, *Player Piano*, "Deer in the Works" in *Welcome to the Monkey House* [1968], or *Breakfast of Champions* [1973]). *Galápagos* itself cautions against this disastrous choice, but unlike many novels which contain a similar warning, including *Slapstick* Vonnegut's weakest novel, *Galápagos* does not postulate an idealized picture of a reversion to some pre-industrial state where most of the good things from the contemporary world remain, but society becomes feudal in outlook, organization, and technology.⁵ Instead, as Mustazza observes:

the movement in the narrative [of *Galápagos*] is bidirectional, progressive in that it applies a Darwinian solution to the problem of moral error, retrogressive insofar as the state of innocence that is ultimately achieved is allusively linked to primal mythic innocence. (55)

"This was," as the narrator says, "a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains" (*Galápagos*, 9 and compare 270).

The disaster which precipitates the change in evolution in *Galápagos* appears benign unlike in *Deadeye Dick* (1982) where a neutron bomb wipes out Midland City producing not a murmur from an uncaring, callous, indifferent world, or in *Cat's Cradle* where human greed and stupidity precipitates death by freezing of all life on the planet, or in *Slaughterhouse-Five* where the universe ends because a Tralfamadorean test pilot accidentally wipes it out (80). In *Galápagos* the human population on most

⁵ For a negative view of such values see Jackson, especially 141—56; and Hunter, especially 28—38 and 127—9.

of the planet simply fails to reproduce, hence dies out, except for a small saving remnant on the new ark of the Galápagos Islands.

To tell this tale of humanity's evolving "a million years in the future," Vonnegut invents an ideal omniscient, invisible narrator Leon Trout (son of the nefarious Kilgore Trout) who reads minds, discerns motivation, predicts events accurately over the millennia of his tale. He describes his role as writer as: "Nature's experiment with voyeurism, as my father was Nature's experiment with ill-founded self-confidence" (82). Moreover, Leon writes purely for his art's sake, since he has not "the slightest hint that there might actually be a reader somewhere. There isn't one. There can't be one" (257).

The ephemeral nature of Trout's writing along with his total lack of an audience raises issues central to most discussions of contemporary art that Vonnegut explores more fully in *Bluebeard*. They are also cogently posed in Tom Wolfe's story in *The Painted Word* (1975) of the masterpiece created by the greatest artist in the history of the world:

Suppose the greatest artist in the history of the world, impoverished and unknown at the time, had been sitting at a table in the old Automat at Union Square, cadging some free water and hoping to cop a leftover crust of toasted corn muffin. . . and suddenly he got the inspiration for the greatest work of art in the history of the world. Possessing not even so much as a pencil or a burnt match, he dipped his forefinger into the glass of water and began recording this greatest of all inspirations. . . on a paper napkin, with New York tap water as his paint. In a matter of seconds. . . the water had diffused through the paper and the grand design vanished, whereupon the greatest artist in the history of the world slumped to the table and died of a broken heart, and the manager came over, and he thought that here was nothing more than a dead wino

with a wet napkin. Now, the question is: Would that have been the greatest work of art in the history of the world? (103—4)⁶

Vonnegut improves on Wolfe's joke while sharpening its point by having his narrator die *before* he writes *Galápagos* and by having him write on air rather than in water! The result is an invisible novel written by an author dead for a million years.

Like all of Vonnegut's narrators Trout in *Galápagos* and Karabekian in *Bluebeard* are truly amateur writers, single-book authors with no previous writing experience which helps account for their "telegraphic. . . manner" which proves as appropriate for them to use as it was for the Tralfamadoreans in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut has one of his characters in *Bluebeard*, Circe Berman voice a criticism of Karabekian's style which echoes many of Vonnegut's own critics: "How come you never use semicolons?'. . . 'How come you chop it all up into little sections instead of letting it flow and flow?'" (38). But Berman speaks from her own perspective as a best-selling author unlike Karabekian, Trout *fils*, or Trout *pere* each of whom is unconcerned about his readership, if any. Moreover, the narrative voice of each—which Vonnegut elsewhere describes a "the voice of a child" (*Palm Sunday* 58)—proves admirably suited to their stories and personalities.

In *Galápagos* Vonnegut uses both the fictional technique of an omniscient if naive narrator writing in the future for no discernible or possible audience, and the startling nature of earth's future fictional inhabitants as ways of commenting satirically on human beings' incredible penchant for self-destruction. The narrator's often incredulous tone, as he observes what humans appear to do best, accentuates what Vonnegut elsewhere calls "the unbelievability of life as it really is" (*Palm Sunday* 297) which in this novel centers on human stupidity, short-sightedness, and unthinking brutality towards one another and the planet. Leon Trout

⁶ Compare Rabo Karabekian's disappearing paintings which might as well have been painted with tapwater or Kilgore Trout's inability to find any writing implement in *Breakfast of Champions* (67).

observes from his perspective of “a million years in the future” those large-brained, terribly mobile, inquisitive creatures, whose:

big brains. . . would tell their owners, in effect, “Here is a crazy thing we could actually do, probably, but we would never do it, of course. It’s just fun to think about.”

And then, as though in trances, the people would really do it—have slaves fight each other to the death in the Colosseum, or burn people alive in the public square for holding opinions which were locally unpopular, or build factories whose only purpose was to kill people in industrial quantities, or to blow up whole cities, and on and on. (266).

The restrained attitude of the narrator nicely mimics that of a doctor diagnosing the illness of a patient. This pose of objectivity becomes in turn a perfect vehicle for satirizing the human mind’s delight in devising engines of destruction, such as exploding rockets.

Trout’s incredulity also helps emphasize the lack of human foresight which applies thinking not to the problem of survival, but to the problem of destruction. Rather than Juvenalian moral outrage, he adopts the more Horacean stance of neutral amazement:

No single human being could claim credit for that rocket, which was going to work so perfectly. It was the collective achievement of all who had ever put their big brains to work on the problem of how to capture and compress the diffuse violence of which nature was capable, and drop it in relatively small packages on their enemies. (189—190.)⁷

Extending this contrast between human creativity and destructiveness Trout compares the rocket meeting its target with human sexual consummation: “No explosion. . . in Vietnam could compare with what

⁷ Trout also captures the discontinuity between the spectators’ delight in watching a rocket explode and the violent damage that results from such an explosion.

happened when that Peruvian rocket put the tip of its nose, that part of its body most richly supplied with exposed nerve endings, into that Ecuadorian radar dish.” Instead of completing the sexual image, Trout breaks the narration to insert an apparently irrelevant comment about art in the far future: “No one is interested in sculpture these days. Who could handle a chisel or a welding torch with their flippers or their mouths?” This violent wrenching away from the sexual imagery used to describe the rocket about to hit its target to the objective statement of the lack of sculpture in the future breaks the narrative flow while pointing to the loss of creativity through violence and sets up the next comic effect by suspending but not abandoning the imagery of sexual consummation. Such imagery contrasts sharply with the rocket’s destructive function:

Into the lava plinth beneath it these words might be incised,
expressing the sentiments of all who had had a hand in the
design and manufacture and sale and purchase and launch of
the rocket, and of all of whom high explosives were a branch
of the entertainment industry:

... ‘Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish’d.
William Shakespeare (1564—1616)
(189—90)

Throughout *Galápagos* similar quotations from poets, dramatists and novelists, statesmen and philosophers appear juxtaposed to the picture of the downward slide of humanity into the sea caused by its failure to listen to the wisdom contained in such quotations or to find value in the creations of its artists. Humans have failed to protect those who love from the effects of war, and worst of all have insisted on following the path of destruction as exemplified in the rocket’s explosive power. Vonnegut’s comedy reflects human shortcomings and failures, warns humanity against approaching disaster, yet does so without either moralizing, preaching, or declaiming.

In contrast to *Cat's Cradle* which apocalyptically concludes with the world coming to an end, and which reflects Bokonon's belief that: "Maturity. . . is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (134), *Galápagos* suggests that laughter and good humor may yet enable humanity to survive the "bitter disappointment" of the inevitable discovery that the world, humanity, and, yes, human beings themselves are not only imperfect, but are also an endangered species. When asked on an employment application form what his avocation was, Bokonon wrote: "Being alive"; when asked his occupation he wrote: "Being dead" (*Cat's Cradle*, 95). Where *Cat's Cradle* concentrates on human myopia which chooses the human vocation of death as all life perishes, *Galápagos* emphasizes the human "avocation," as the species mutates in order to survive. Rather than the dark apocalyptic humor of *Cat's Cradle*, *Galápagos's* comedy is lighter and more positive. Brian Aldiss's response to *Galápagos* sums up the novel's strengths: "Sprightly, funny, suspenseful, *Candide*-like, and endearingly ingenious in its telling, . . ." ⁸ ". . . the book's a joy." ⁹

Galápagos, despite its disaster scenario, has about it an air of optimism and joy which it shares with *Bluebeard* which also describes many defeats and short-comings but of one person rather than the whole of humanity. Rabo Karabekian's mother survived the great massacre of the Armenians by the Turks—which added the word "genocide" to the languages of the world (3)—while her son lives to witness the end of the most destructive war yet fought on European soil when another megalomaniac practiced genocide in his attempt to systematically exterminate a portion of the human race. Yet Karabekian's biography demonstrates that through self-acceptance, and the serious use of imagination and creativity, human beings can become reconciled to their weakness and fragility, while still remaining outraged at human stupidity and greed, and the many disastrous self-defeating schemes such "big brained" rational creatures concoct, let alone attempt to implement.

⁸ *The Trillion Year Spree* (329).

⁹ Letter to the author 14 November 1988.

As *Galápagos* examines the misuse of human reason and invention as the principal danger to life on planet earth, so *Bluebeard* looks at the misuse of human creativity as endangering true art. Karabekian a reformed abstract expressionist painter is a more complex character in *Bluebeard* than the Rabo Karabekian honored by writer-manque the Midland Arts Festival for artistic achievement together with the writermanque Kilgore Trout (*Breakfast of Champions*). When challenged by a cocktail waitress in the earlier novel to defend his painting, *The Temptation of St. Anthony* that consisted of a vertical stripe of Day-Glo orange on a field of green as a work of art, he extravagantly replied:

“... the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal—the ‘I am’ to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us—in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us.” (221)

Karabekian’s speculations parody much of the criticism of Abstract Expressionism which in a more extreme form appears in Tom Wolfe’s spirited, if highly opinionated, book on the necessity of theory for modern art, *The Painted Word*.¹⁰ Although *The Temptation of St. Anthony* has no content, Karabekian ascribes considerable significance to it:

“A sacred picture of St. Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering and of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness of all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery.” (221)

¹⁰ Unlike Wolfe, Vonnegut provides an example of a positive, genuine artistic achievement in Karabekian’s last painting.

What is striking about Karabekian's defense—besides its articulate self-confidence—what it shares with much of contemporary theorizing about modern art, is the slight relation, if any, these assertions bear to the painting itself. (See, for example, almost any review or essay by the art critic-philosopher Arthur Danto.) Vonnegut satirically suggests that beauty no longer resides in the eye of the beholder, but artistic significance lies wholly within the head of the observer who looks at the painting and theorizes whether that observer be an artist, critic, or gallery-goer.

While this discussion of the nature and value of art is somewhat peripheral to *Breakfast of Champions*, it becomes central to *Bluebeard*. The latter novel raises the perennial issue of what is art and who is the “real” artist by contrasting Karabekian and his Abstract Expressionist painter friends with Dan Gregory, the illustrator who paints things more real than they appear to the eye, lords it over the non-representational painters, worships Benito Mussolini and is “probably the highest paid artist in American history” (50). Examining the Abstract Expressionists’ exuberant splashing of paint on canvas and comparing the astronomical prices they fetch, Vonnegut comments wryly: “Tastes change”¹¹; yet Vonnegut’s satiric focus is directed only in part on the whimsical nature of the art market. While society makes Gregory fabulously wealthy by purchasing everything he paints, his work fails as art because it has no emotional or spiritual content: Since Gregory’s goal is merely to illustrate someone else’s ideas or feelings, his work is, although technically proficient, “good painting about nothing”¹² or what Holger Cahill contemptuously calls the “merely decorative”:

art is not merely decorative, a sort of unrelated accompaniment to life. In a genuine sense it should have use; it should be interwoven with the very stuff and texture of human experience, intensifying that experience, making it more

¹¹ Jacket Blurb written and signed by Vonnegut, April 1, 1987 for the hardcover edition of *Bluebeard*.

¹² Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko declared: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing” (545).

Moreover, Gregory's illustrations, although painted in minute and exact detail, are completely removed from "the very stuff and texture of human experience"; they prove as void of content as Rabo Karabekian's extremely well executed huge abstract canvasses. The novel asks repeatedly which works are art and therefore essential to life and which are decoration and therefore inessential. Are Dan Gregory's fantastic illustrations, Karabekian's wall-sized paintings, or Terry Kitchen's spray gun paintings? Are any of these valuable as art or does each have value only as one person's attempt to play with paint? How does each of the three measure up against the great artists of other ages? Can a line be drawn from Rembrandt to Pollock?¹³ Or from Gregory to Karabekian?

Vonnegut's satire on the world of art, artists, connoisseurs, and critics provides provisional answers. "Artistic justice," for example, occurs in *Bluebeard* when Karabekian's paintings return, "thanks to unforeseen chemical reactions," after a few years to their pristine state as sized canvas: "... people who had paid fifteen- or twenty- or even thirty thousand dollars for a picture. . . found themselves gazing at a blank canvas, all ready for a new picture, and ringlets of colored tapes and what looked like moldy Rice Krispies on the floor" (19).¹⁴ Perhaps Karabekian unwittingly became a Conceptualist painter, one whose work exists only as a concept (compare "The Greatest Artist in the History of the World" and Leon Trout's invisible novel) or perhaps he is only the latest example of "Now you see it, now you don't"—as stage magicians used to say during the Great Depression while the rabbit disappeared into the tall silk hat—or more likely his *success*

¹³ Although grouping some of the moderns with the Great Masters may appear either strained or pure errant nonsense, depending upon one's view of the moderns, one critic did lump them together or, rather, in his inelegant prose, "tossed [them] into one pot": "The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto. All alike became painters of illusion" (Leo Steinburg quoted in Wolfe, 79).

¹⁴ The trade name of the disappearing paint changes from *Breakfast of Champions* to *Bluebeard*, as casually as the names of characters shift between and among Vonnegut stories and novels. Vonnegut has remarked several times that such changes have no significance; see, for example: Vonnegut interview with Reilly, 7—8.

illustrates once again the truth articulated in "The Emperor's New Clothes." Whatever the choice Vonnegut's satire in *Bluebeard* works because, in addition to its implied and stated criticism, he offers readers a positive standard by which to judge both Abstract Expressionists and illustrators in Karabekian's final canvas, "Now It's the Women's Turn." This monumental painting records in exact minute detail the moment World War II ended in Europe. Although Karabekian had observed the setting of his painting "when the sun came up the day the Second World War ended in Europe" (281), the meaning, the significance of this event only revealed itself to him over time (as the meaning or non-meaning of Dresden unfolded itself over time to Vonnegut). The 5,219 figures in this enormous sixty-four by eight foot canvas, appear convincingly real not because the artist saw or knew them but because before creating their image on canvas, he invented a detailed war story for each and only after that painted "the person it had happened to" (283). His painting is at once as precise as Gregory's illustrations and in some important ways as imaginatively playful as an Abstract Expressionist canvas. The painter who's career prompted Vonnegut to create an Abstract Expressionist proficient in rendering such a scene in great detail was Jackson Pollock who, according to Vonnegut, did "more than any other human being to make his nation, and especially New York City, the unchallenged center of innovative painting in all this world" (*Fates* 41). Although Pollock spent much of his life dripping paint onto canvas, Vonnegut rightly emphasizes that he "was capable of depicting in photographic detail [any scene desired]. . . He had been trained in his craft by, among others, that most exacting American master of representational art. . . Thomas Hart Benton" (42).

In "Now It Is the Women's Turn" Karabekian returns to "life itself" which he, like most artists of his generation had ignored "utterly" for very good reasons as Vonnegut notes.

And could any moralist have called for a more appropriate reaction by painters to World War II, to the death camps and Hiroshima and all the rest of it, than pictures without persons or artifacts, without even allusions to the blessings of Nature?

A full moon, after all, had come to be known as a “bomber’s moon.” Even an orange could suggest a diseased planet, a disgraced humanity, if someone remembered, as many did, that the Commandant of Aushwitz and his wife and children, under the greasy smoke from the ovens, had had good food every day. (*Fates* 44)

But Karabekian goes far beyond this initial reaction and so with, as he puts it, this “last thing I have to give to the world,” discovers and fulfills his vocation as an artist something he had been unable to do either as an Abstract Expressionist or as an illustrator. Unlike his earlier work, this last painting reflects powerfully his life-experience and feelings. It gives him peace, while eliciting a positive response from the common people who come to view it (300, 283). He thereby becomes an example of “the artist. . . freely functioning in relation to society, [while]. . . society wants what he is able to offer” (Cahill 473).¹⁵ No longer does Karabekian have to browbeat his audience—whether a cocktail waitress in Midland City or his neighbor on Fire Island—into accepting what he has done as art. Rabo the one-eyed painter becomes king in the blind land of art.

Vonnegut thus suggests in *Bluebeard* that the true artist uses technique—whether it be putting paint on canvas or putting words on paper—to serve human beings and their human feelings.¹⁶ In the end Karabekian serves humanity not by providing it with more interior or exterior decoration, but by depicting a “crucial [subject]. . . which is tragic and timeless.” In so doing, he stands out in bold relief against the pale shadow of Dan Gregory, who, despite his talent and popular success,

¹⁵ Contrast Trout’s total lack of relationship to society in *Galápagos* where the evolved seal-like humans obviously neither read nor write.

¹⁶ Vonnegut through Karabekian aligns himself with, among others, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko who challenged the “widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism.” They maintained as a positive alternative that: “the subject is crucial and only subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. . . . Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult any one who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home. . .” (545).

remained merely a “decorator” his whole professional life. Like the notorious Andy Warhol, who once “put an ad in *The Village Voice* saying he would endorse anything, anything at all, for money. . . and listing his telephone number” (Wolfe 86), Gregory wields a brush available for hire; he is ready and able to illustrate or reproduce anything at all for anyone at all for money. In contrast, Karabekian rather than merely illustrating someone else’s idea or feeling creates something genuine revealing what James Joyce once termed “the simple intuitions which are the tests of reality” (81). His last painting includes all life after the war: the lunatics, war prisoners, concentration camp victims, ragged remnants of an exhausted army, and civilians—the dead, dying, and living. The emphasis falls on all humanity gathered together as the sun comes up after the disaster—“a fair field full of folk” as Piers the plowman said, rather than on the world worn out by war. “Now It Is the Women’s Turn,” and perhaps they will manage things better intimates Vonnegut at the end of this, his twelfth novel.

Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Bluebeard* concludes with a vision of accepting life as it is, but with a significant difference: if left the reader with Billy Pilgrim’s vision of Tralfamadorean serenity—which by definition is extra-terrestrial, hence unattainable by human beings—*Bluebeard* ends with a picture of the acceptance of human limits, whether of artists, self, friends, or parents. Nor does Karabekian become a “ghost in the rigging” such as Leon Trout in *Galápagos* who is condemned to spend a million years in the Sisyphean task of recording on air his observations of human beings evolving back to the sea. Instead, he achieves his vocation as an artist, one who creates a rich portrait of human hope to which others respond enthusiastically. Through Karabekian Vonnegut celebrates human creativity, friendship, and community without which, as shown in *Galápagos*, those “great big brains” would be left on their own to become the ultimate threat to the survival of humanity, of all life, and of the very earth itself. At the end of *Bluebeard*—as at the end of so many other Vonnegut novels—the protagonist dies, but unlike other Vonnegut heroes, Karabekian dies happily and at peace with himself as he celebrates his life and accomplishments saying with all his heart: “Oh happy Meat. Oh, happy Soul. Oh, Happy Rabo Karabekian” (300).

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